




Hot Knives

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Hot Knives

by [ChelseaFrown \(orphan_account\)](#).

Summary

Tommy Travels, but eventually, he comes home.

Title based on a Pigeon Pit song.

This is a sequel, it won't make sense unless you read Nights Like These First!

This was based mostly on these lyrics:

I don't give a shit, I'm not embarrassed I'm just
falling apart on the back porch of the house that I used to live in

I don't know if it's the hot knives or the dissociation
could I still drive this car all night and crawl in bed with you in Oakland?
I can't remember how it happened, I got too used to isolation
now I still talk to you at night to see you smile and feel you listen

Notes

I promise this is the good ending. lmao

I was going to make this longer, but god, it gave me so much trouble. The sad ending will be posted soon.

This isn't canon to NLT, it's just one possible way things could have progressed after the events of that.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

- Translation into Español available: [Cuchillos calientes](#) by [ScapeSystem](#)

When Technoblade woke up, it was to the sound of the coffee pot brewing. Which was surprising, but Phil often woke up extra early after stressful events, and the day before was certainly stressful. When he left his room, Clementine was still asleep on the couch. He passed by her quietly, careful to not wake her, and entered the dining room. That was when the first actual red flag went off, because Phil was not awake. He always sat at the table to drink his coffee, and there was no sign of him.

The second red flag came by way of a post-it note with instructions on how to brew Earl Grey tea. Techno *knew* how to brew it, had been doing it for years, but it was still there, in familiar handwriting, pastel yellow against the monotone colors of the kitchen itself. Only Tommy could have written it. Again, Techno brushed this off as odd but not unheard of, Tommy had been up late, perhaps he simply wanted to sleep in but wanted to make sure Wilbur's tea was the way he liked it.

The third red flag came without any room for doubt. When Techno pushed open Tommy's door, the room was unlit. Tommy always kept a light on, a lamp or his cellphone or something to cut through the darkness. Techno flipped the light on with shaking hands and he knew.

The room was stripped bare, with no blankets or Knick-knacks or stuffed animals on the bed, no books on the shelves, no shoes or clothes in the closet that was hanging open. It was glaringly obvious he was gone. He ran to the window, begging to see the van still in the driveway, but there was nothing but the four other vehicles, Phil's, Wilbur's, Clementine's, and his own. He would deny it until the day he died, but the scream he let out, a call for his family, echoed like a mourner's grief through the home. Phil entered the room first, clearly not taking in the room itself, too focused on Techno. Wilbur entered second and similarly was too busy comforting Techno's choked cries to realize the cause.

Clementine, though. She stood in the doorway and stared at the family in silence for thirty seconds before muttering just a single sentence.

"He didn't even say goodbye, did he?"

It was enough for the others to realize. For them to take in their surroundings, from the blank walls to the pristine condition of the sheets on the bed, spare sheets from the linen closet, not Tommy's. It was enough to make them mourn with him.

Clementine left in the morning. She promised if Tommy got in touch with her she'd let them know, promised Phil she'd keep in touch with him, and then she was gone.

Techno is fairly sure he's in shock. He'd known Tommy would leave, but he'd expected it to be different, expected to help him pack the van and wave at him as he drove away, and expected to get a phone call five hours later so Tommy could tell them about where he was. He did not expect a cold bedroom and instructions on how to make fucking *tea* to be the only things left of his baby brother when he went.

He did not expect it to hurt this bad.

—

Wilbur was not sure of the best way to be woken up, but he was positive of the worst. The sound of Techno's voice carrying through the house, panicking and calling out for them, was by far the most horrific way to be pulled from unconsciousness.

He barely registered that Techno was in Tommy's room, only knowing that his brother was in pain and it was his job to fix it.

When Clementine spoke, though, Wilbur knew there wasn't anything he could do to make it better. Everything slid into place, but there was a gaping hole where Tommy was meant to fit that was so clearly empty it was nearly palpable.

Clementine left, and when Techno made his tea he nearly choked on the flavor, not because it was bad, but because it wasn't how Techno made his tea, it was how Tommy made it. Brewed just a longer and a little sweeter than his first brother had ever done.

He wasn't going to cry. He was going to keep it together because his family needed him.

Phil sat at the head of the table, a haunted look in his eyes and a grim expression on his face. Techno wasn't sitting, pacing the room, and looking heartbroken beyond all else.

Wilbur tried to reason with himself. Tommy would call, he would text, he would *come home*. There was no way he wouldn't. Tommy left every weekend. Sure, he never cleared out his room to do so, but he would be back.

Near noon, Wilbur texted Tommy's phone.

'Rules say you're supposed to tell us before you leave the house, y'know.'

He didn't get a reply. No read receipt either. But that was okay, because Tommy was probably still driving. He'd check it soon, surely. The house felt quiet.

—

Wilbur broke the news to their friends that Tommy had gone when a week passed with no contact. He sent the text to the group chat, unwilling to type it more than once. The replies came in near-instantly.

Wibbler: Tommy left without saying goodbye.

Tub: i wondred y he didnt txt me back. Whnes he cmonig home?

Boo: wait, what??? Like without telling you he was leaving at all?

Drem: I'll be over in 25.

Royalteret: wdym?

Snapchat: doesn't he do this like every weekend tho

Schlatt: I'm guessing by the fact that you needed to message us that he left-left. I'm omw too.

Tub: wiat like hes not comign back?

Royalteret: Hold on, you mean like he's actually gone?

Fox: you're joking

Nikkkkkiii: Wil this isn't a very funny joke

Wibbler: he packed his stuff up and left. We don't know if he's coming back, nobody has heard from him yet. It's not a joke.

Wilbur sat down his phone and sighed. He should probably warn the house that people were coming over.

"Dad? Tech? Dream and Schlatt are on their way," he called. Phil called back an agreement of sorts.

"Why are they coming?" Technoblade snapped from the living room.

"I told them Tommy left. They're probably coming to check on us."

"You don't need to call our friends every time something happens."

“Tech, please. I know you’re upset-“

“Upset? That doesn’t even begin to cover it. I’m *furious* . He could have at least said goodbye, but he didn’t, he just left and if he never comes home we’ll just get to wonder about him for the rest of our lives. It’s not like we have some sort of tracker on him.”

“Wait- do, do you remember his Spotify? We can see if he’s listening to music, right?”

“What good does that do?”

“I mean, at least we’ll know he’s...” Wilbur didn’t have the heart to say it, but the word *alive* hung in the air like stagnant smoke.

“I’m not doing that.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t want to know. I’d rather wonder forever than end up with confirmation somewhere down the line.”

—

When the first month passed, the family fell back into a tentative routine. Techno has steadfastly refused to talk about Tommy, and had, in turn, started pushing away Wilbur, who often would bring him up in passing. Small things, like how Tommy had been listening to the same song on repeat for hours, or when something got spilled how he wished Tommy were there to help clean it up. Never heavy, nothing deeper than surface level, but it often felt like a stab in the gut to Techno.

He had also not spoken to Dream since the first week. Dream never let Techno stew in his emotions, encouraging him to express them in ways that Techno found distasteful at best and painful at worst, and he would much rather be angry than bring to the surface what he actually was feeling.

Wilbur had taken back up smoking in earnest, rarely smelling of anything but menthol smoke and cheap wine. Phil had barreled back into overworking, and the promises of spending more time together as a family were all but forgotten. It was a strained dynamic, but it was familiar enough that they went on.

One month turned to two, turned to six, and Wilbur and Techno had both gone back to school and made it through a far, far too somber Christmas still passively avoiding one another.

And then the fight.

Techno had known Wilbur for a long time, but rarely did they ever get into actual arguments. This was an actual argument.

“We’ve had plenty of people pass through, and most of them stayed longer than him,” always just him. Never Tommy. “I don’t know why you’re in such a mood about it.”

“He was family, he was our brother! How can you just act like you don’t care?”

“It’s not an act. I just don’t care,” Technoblade replied flatly, pushing down his guilt. “It’s not like he cares about us.”

“He did care about us! You know that as well as I do!”

“Then where is he? If he cares so much, where’s he at, Wilbur?” The fight had started because Phil had hidden away the picture he’d gotten for the Christmas before last. Wil noticed it not on the desk while Phil was at work, and told Techno. Techno had replied that it

was a good thing. The yelling had mostly died down, but there was still anger there, rolling off of them in droves.

“I think he’s gone,” Wilbur muttered, staring at the ground.

“Yes, Wil, we know he’s gone. Seeing as he isn’t here, which is my point.”

“No- Tech- I think he’s *gone* .”

“What makes you say that?”

“I- he hasn’t listened to a single song in almost three weeks. He always listens to music.” That caught Techno off guard.

“Maybe he just switched to private, or got a new account.”

“Why would he? After all that time?”

“Probably for the same reason he never called, Wil. He doesn’t want to be found. That doesn’t mean he’s dead.”

“But-“

“It’s *Tommy*. He’s too stubborn to die.”

“You remember the cliff as much as I do.”

“Yes, and I remember him walking away from it. He isn’t dead.”

“Tech-“

“No. He’s not.” Wilbur sighed, nodded, and left the room. Techno went to his bedroom.

Anxiety ate at him for weeks. But Wil never brought up the Spotify again, and he’d stopped mentioning him altogether. Phil didn’t bring him up either. Techno wasn’t sure if Wil had mentioned his suspicions or not, but either way, it was the same result. They all ignored the fact that family photos were missing from the hallway. They all ignored the gaps in conversations. They all ignored how it felt too calm in the house, now.

—

When nearly a year had passed, five months since the last time Tommy had listened to anything, Wilbur gave up hope. Tommy would be 19, now, which threw him off a little, but most of the time, Wilbur didn’t think of him. Only in brief times when Dad would get a little snappish, or when Techno left the house with no explanation, or in quiet moments when Wilbur sat on the edge of the cliffs with Schlatt and drank until he forgot his own name.

“Should I cut you off? Don’t want you taking the fast way down,” Schlatt teased, gesturing toward the water before wincing. “Ah- sorry, didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.” Wilbur almost wasn’t sure what he was talking about for a moment.

“Oh, no, you’re fine. His almost dying doesn’t hurt as much as him actually dying.”

“What the hell are you talking about? Tommy’s dead?” Wilbur shrugged, taking a swig from the bottle.

“Yeah, probably. Either that or he suddenly decided he didn’t want to listen to music ever again.”

“Oh, the Spotify thing? That doesn’t mean anything, Wil.”

“Doesn’t it, though? I mean- music was always a big deal to him, right? What makes someone who listens to music non-stop stop listening?”

“Well, what about other social media? Check his Twitter or something. Don’t just assume he’s dead.”

“Tommy doesn’t use his Twitter. His last tweet was like 4 years ago.”

“I mean, does it hurt to check, though?” Wilbur shrugged, opening the app. He didn’t make it to Tommy’s page, didn’t need to, because there, on his newsfeed, was a picture of him, scar much more healed and a smile on his face. Tommy had been mentioned in the tweet, which was why it was on his page. The caption read ‘ *Miss u already dude.* ’

Then another, from someone else, a few posts down. ‘ *The party ain’t the same w/o you dude* ’ Tommy was drinking in that one, flipping off the camera.

When Wil clicked on his profile, there were dozens of posts he was tagged in, none of which had a response from him. They were mostly from the same few people. Wilbur considered reaching out, but it felt wrong. If they hadn’t reached out to him, there was a good chance they didn’t know who he was. Wilbur thought that maybe that would hurt worse than knowing; knowing that he was gone and hadn’t thought of them the whole time.

Whatever hope Wilbur had shattered, his heart aching. “I need to go home,” He choked out, already stumbling to his feet. “I need to go home now.”

“Wait, why? What’s going on?” Wilbur silently handed over his phone. Schlatt scrolled through Tommy’s page with a pinched expression. “I mean, he-”

“Don’t. You know what those are, don’t pretend to be an optimist.”

“Okay, Wil. I’ll take you home.”

“Wan’ Tommy,” Connor whined again, pouting.

“I know you do, Conner. I’m sorry he’s not here,” Techno sighed. “Wanna go see Phil? You like Phil.”

“P’il isn’t Tommy.”

“Please, I told you, Tommy isn’t going to be here,” Techno was cut off by the sound of the front door opening. “Wil?” Wilbur stumbled into the living room, looking particularly heartbroken, saw the kids, and stiffened up. Connor was pouting, Michael was coloring, and Techno looked close to exploding.

“He-hey, guys. What’re we playing?”

“D’you know when Tommy’s gonna be home? He’s ‘posed to teach me how to build a pillow castle.”

“Come color with me,” Michael whined to Connor. “Tom inni here, Tech said that ‘lready.”

“I’m sorry guys, Tommy isn’t coming back, he left, remember?” Techno did not miss the way Wilbur’s voice cracked. He shot him a confused look, but Wil just shook his head.

When the boys went home, Wilbur curled up on the couch with Techno. They hadn't sat together like that in so long it was almost awkward.

"Are you going to tell me what's got you so upset, or do I need to guess?" Wilbur shook his head. "No? Should I guess then?" Another headshake. "Why not?"

"You said you didn't want to know." Techno froze at that.

"Changing my mind, then. What happened?"

"Tommy's Twitter page is full of memorial posts."

"No, no it's not." Wilbur just pulled out his phone and handed it over. "Oh my god. Is he drinking in that one?"

"Yeah."

"I- fuck. What was he thinking?"

"I don't know. He looks happy, in all of the photos though, doesn't he? Happier than he was here. But he still-"

"We don't know what happened. It could have been an accident. Tommy attracted bad luck like a broken mirror."

"Should we tell Dad?"

"Probably, yeah."

When Tommy made it to the state line, something in his mind screamed for him to turn around. This was a stupid, impulsive decision. But he kept going, music blaring and hair whipping around in the wind. It felt *good*, to finally be free.

He drove for nearly 12 hours straight before stopping to put gas in the van. While he stopped he checked his phone, a few texts from Wilbur and Tubbo, several missed calls from Phil and Clementine, but not much else. He listened to the voicemails.

'You're an idiot. Be safe, and stay in touch with them, T. You're breaking their hearts.'

'Hey, kiddo. I didn't expect you to answer, but I hope you're doing okay. Be careful. Remember you always have a place here, okay? Call me soon if you can.'

'I'm heading home. You have my address, stop by if you need a place to stay, alright? My door's always open.'

'It's Dad. I just wanted to let you know we love you, Tommy. I didn't say it in the last call.'

Tommy didn't listen to the rest. He also didn't reply. He just sighed, turned off his phone, and kept driving.

When he made it to the first town he stayed in, it was high noon. There were only a few people out and about, and there was plenty of campgrounds surrounding the place for Tommy to park. He stopped at a small diner.

He was seated quickly, the hostess not paying him much mind as she directed him to a small booth in the corner. The waitress, however, gave him a knowing look.

“Hey, darlin’. Where you running to?” Tommy was surprised, to say the least.

“No plans yet, just west. Can I get a coffee?”

“Yessir. Family or just a need to leave?”

“Bit of both, I guess. How’d you know?”

“All of you kids have the same look when you pass through. We get ‘em in droves every summer, kids who can’t stay still yet but have nowhere else to be. You should stay in town a while, strawberry fest is about to start, it’s worth the wait.”

“Yeah, maybe I will. Thank you.”

So Tommy stayed. He ate vine-ripened strawberries and made friends with the townspeople. He ate breakfast and dinner at the diner, where the same waitress always brought him his coffee. He suspected she owned the place, but he didn’t ask. She always brought him something sweet, too. Pie, cobbler, a muffin, whatever they had that day. She talked to him about his plans, but never asked where he was from. It was nice.

Tommy stayed for weeks, even after the festival had ended, helping the local shopkeep with re-arranging the shelves and chatting with the vendors at the farmers market. He helped carry crates of produce to stalls and distracted the vendor’s kids with stories of greek heroes when they were particularly rambunctious.

But he moved on eventually, a shelf full of strawberry preserves and honey and a stack of polaroid photos now filling a cupboard.

The next town was similar, another small, close-knit community that welcomed him with open arms. There he sang with local musicians and learned how to work on his van a bit. They let him go with a new set of tires and an oil change, a guitar pick strung onto a necklace cord, and a set of tools Tommy barely knew how to use. He wasn't so much going west, anymore, snaking south and north as he saw fit until he found another place to stop. West was the vague direction, sure, but he was more concerned with the trip than the destination.

Each town he stopped in seemed to soothe a part of him, seemed to give him back a piece that was missing. He didn't have a reputation as a problem child with these people, even when his temper got the best of him or something sent him spiraling toward panic, they just patted his shoulder and offered him whatever they could to help and expected nothing in return.

But he made it as far west as he could get in early November, a van full of trinkets and offers of places to come back to when the time was right. Diner mugs and jackets and jars upon jars of fruits. Recipes he couldn't exactly follow from his van but he kept anyway. He decided he'd find a place to settle for the winter on the coast, warmer than where he was from, and spend a few months enjoying the ocean.

He made friends, there, one evening when he was sat on the beach watching the sun dip past the horizon.

"Hey, kid! What're you doing?" Tommy glanced at the pair, both around his age, jogging up to him.

"Just relaxing, I guess."

"Mind if we join?" Tommy shrugged, and they plopped down in the sand next to him. "So, mysterious man, what can we call you?"

"Oh, I'm Tommy. And you are..?"

"I'm Eryn, This is Freddie. The pleasure is all yours, I'm sure." Tommy laughed at that, and it started something new.

The pair were local students, Tommy was right that they were about his age. They were fast friends, the three of them often causing a bit of chaos when together. But there were quiet nights too, where they would ask him about where he was from, ask why he was there, and Tommy rarely gave a straight answer.

“I’m from the East,” He would say. “The scars are from a fire,” He’d insist with no further explanation. “There’s nothing that pulls me out of those states when I seem lost to the world,” He’d apologize, because while it wasn’t totally true, he didn’t know how to explain that his family was the things that usually kept him grounded and they were thousands of miles away. But they never pushed, always accepting those answers at face value. Tommy found that he no longer needed to fill the silence with loud music, and over time he swapped from listening to his own to letting his friends play theirs. When winter came in earnest, he spent the holidays surrounded by people who only knew him as little more than an interesting stranger.

Winter gave way to spring, and Tommy stuck around a little longer. He got a job at the local grocery mart and rented out a monthly lease on a three-bedroom apartment with his two friends and he took odd jobs to fill the time. It wasn’t like the other towns, that felt cozy and inviting, this felt more like somewhere he had to earn a place in, and he enjoyed it. He loved the way people learned his name and would ask after his friends while in his grocery line, he liked the way the local teenagers would harass him into telling them stories of his scars, even if he never told them the truth. He even liked the way the older people would shoot him a wary glance and call him nothing but trouble. It felt right.

When his birthday rolled around, Tommy celebrated with his friends. The party was loud, but nobody batted an eye when he told them he didn’t drink, instead offering him soda from glass bottles and telling off anyone who bothered to ask why. But he could feel the need to leave again brewing, so he paid his portion of the rent, sent in his two weeks notice, and headed off again.

His friends understood, he’d told them he wouldn’t be here forever, of course, so they threw a farewell party and he headed back off again with half-promises to keep in touch and visit soon. This time, he headed East. He snaked up and down the country, stopping in towns and leaving his mark on them, by way of hanging signs with a local shopkeep or telling off the occasional asshole who was harassing a waitress. He didn’t have any plans on where he was going, of course, so it shocked him when he drove past an exit sign with a familiar name. He pulled back in and parked his van in the lot of the auto shop, where the mechanic shook his hand and started fussing over the way the tires looked a little ‘too bald’ for his liking. He laughed and spent two weeks there, again learning whatever they were willing to teach. They told him he looked happier, healthier than when he’d passed through the first time, and he

told them he felt it too. He played them Wilbur's songs on his keyboard and told them the necklace was from his brother when they asked. It was the first time he's spoken of home since he'd left.

He missed home so badly it ached, some days. It took all of his energy to not listen to Wilbur's songs on Spotify, but he feared hearing his voice would send him into a spiral. He'd broken his old phone somewhere along the way, so he was not sure how many times his family had reached out, and it ate at him. He wondered how they were doing more nights than he cared to admit. When he saw a musician playing an original song on the sidewalk he thought of Wil. When he'd see someone a little too stoic for the circumstances he thought of Techno. When he saw a father with his children, teasing at letting them roam free he thought of Phil. When he saw teenagers and young adults in pairs laughing like nobody had ever told them to quiet down he thought of Tubbo and Ranboo.

He headed East.

He made it to the first town that welcomed him with as much fanfare as he had the first time. He went to the same diner, and the hostess seated him in his usual booth with the same smile, as if he hadn't been gone for more than a year.

When the waitress brought him his coffee without him ordering it, she sat down peach cobbler, too. Strawberry season must have already passed. She greeted him with her typical smile, ruffled his now much longer hair, and gave him a sly grin.

"Hey, Darlin'. Where you running to?" Tommy laughed.

"No plans yet, just East." She nodded, contemplated, and sat across from him.

"It's good to see you again, Tommy. We wondered where you got off too."

"I mean, I did tell you I was going."

“That doesn’t mean we stopped wonderin’. So, what’s the plan this time? You sticking around for a bit?”

“Probably. I heard the peach fest is coming soon.”

“Yessir, it certainly is. They’ll be glad to have their favorite pack-mule back to help carry the crates.”

“I’ll be glad to do it.”

So he stayed. He ate sweet peaches and took his coffee at the diner and listened to the old ladies chastise him for letting his hair grow so long.

Nearly two months into his visit, the waitress sat with him again.

“You’re getting ready to leave soon, I can tell.”

“Places to be, people to meet.”

“Do you know where you’re headed, yet?” Tommy froze at that. He didn’t have a plan, really. His original destination was just a direction. He shook his head. “Can I give you a suggestion? You can tell me if I overstep a boundary.”

“Sure.”

“Well, When you came through the first time, You were running away. But you’re back now, seems like it might be a good time to go home. Can’t be too far from here, you didn’t look nearly comfortable enough for that back then.” Tommy froze. Home. Is that where he was headed? He *had* been missing them more and more lately.

“You’re right, It’s not too far.”

“Well, think it over, kiddo. If you decide to come back through, Apple season starts in just a month or so.”

“I will, thank you.”

Tommy sat in the driver's seat, staring at his phone. He knew the number, all he had to do was call. He dialed with trembling hands.

“Hello?”

“Dad?” There was no way it was someone else.

“Who is this?”

“I- it’s Tommy.”

“This isn’t funny. Who is this?” Tommy floundered for a minute.

“Dad. It’s me.”

“Tommy?” Phil’s voice sounded very, very sad.

“Yes. I... can I come home?”

“Dad, we need to talk to you,” Wilbur started. “You should sit down.” Phil did.

“What’s this about? What’s going on?”

“It’s about Tommy.” Phil’s heart clenched. They had not spoken of their youngest in a long time. He at first wanted to give it some time, assumed he would reach out eventually, but when his voicemail was too full to leave a message, when his texts went unanswered for months, Phil started thinking maybe he would never hear back. When the calls started coming back with an automated ‘This line is no longer in service’ message, he feared there was nothing he could do.

When he saw Wilbur’s red-rimmed eyes, he braced for the worst.

“What about him?”

“I checked his Twitter today. There are a lot of posts from people. They’re... goodbye posts.”

“What do you mean, goodbye posts?” Phil knew what he meant. He hoped he was wrong.

“Dad. They’re memorial posts. We think... We think something happened, and Tommy’s gone.” Phil’s heart, already so fragile, *shattered*. The idea of his youngest son, his *baby*, gone so young and so far away, stung like a thousand blades.

“Oh.”

“Oh? That’s all you have to say?” Wil snapped. “Oh, okay! We’ll just leave him out of the will! No big deal!” He ranted, throwing his hands up. “Why am I the only one who is upset

by this?"

"You think you're the only one upset? Do you think we aren't mourning too? He wasn't just your brother!" Techno hissed.

"You could have fooled me!"

"Just because we aren't out drinking every night doesn't mean we aren't suffering too! He's been gone for longer than he was here, Wilbur! We have to try to move on eventually!"

"But- but he's *Tommy*. "

"Yes, we know who he was! We know! But what do you want us to do? Do you want us to wallow forever? Do you think *he* would want that? If he was here, what do you think he'd say?"

"Boys." Phil took a deep breath. "Please stop fighting."

They didn't. They screamed at each other long into the night, insults and petty jabs being thrown left and right. Phil scheduled some time off work.

In the morning, he made coffee. Techno made tea, and they sat in utter silence.

And on and on it went. The anger had faded to resignation above all else. The grief festered. Phil hung the family photos back up. He did not look at them.

And then he was sitting in the living room, long after he should have been asleep, and his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number, but *something* told him to answer it anyway, so he did.

“Hello?”

“*Dad?*” The voice was achingly familiar, but it was a wrong number, it *had to be* , because this was not Tommy’s phone, and Tommy was *dead* .

“Who is this?”

“*I- it’s Tommy.*” Phil felt anger arc across his mind. How could someone make a call like this?

“This isn’t funny. Who is this?” The voice was silent for a moment.

“*Dad. It’s me.*” The voice was begging, almost. Phil barely forced out the name.

“Tommy?”

“*Yes. I... can I come home?*” It was asked with so much hesitation, as if it expected a no. Phil could scarcely breathe.

“Of course you can. I- where are you?”

“*Still a half day’s drive away. I just didn’t want to show up unannounced.*”

“You’re always welcome here, Tommy. I- we missed you.” Phil wasn’t going to cry. He wondered if he had fallen asleep in his chair again.

“*I missed you too. I won’t be staying long, I just... it’s been so long, Dad. It’s lonely without you.*”

“You can stay as long as you want. Forever, we don’t mind,” Phil promised, clutching the phone.

“We can talk more when I get there, okay? I can be there tomorrow morning.”

“Is that safe?”

“Who cares?” Tommy laughed. Phil thought it was the most wonderful sound he’d ever heard.

“I do. Be safe.”

“Tomorrow afternoon, then. I’ll drive a few hours and take a nap.”

“Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I love you.”

“I love you too, Toms.”

The line went dead, and Phil sat for a few minutes in silence before he realized there were two other people who needed to hear this. He forced himself to his feet, knocked on Techno’s door, which was opened immediately.

“What?”

“Living room. Now, please. I have to get Wil.”

“Oh...kay? Everything alright?” Phil just nodded and went to get his oldest. He barely touched the door when it swung open. Wil was clearly not sleeping, his hair still styled and still fully dressed. “Come downstairs.”

“Why?” Wilbur’s voice was challenging, standoffish, and defensive.

“Please,” Phil asked again. “Please come downstairs.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” Wilbur followed, and took a seat on the far end of the couch, as far away from Techno as he could be. “What’s going on?”

“It’s about Tommy,” Phil prefaced, taking a deep breath.

“Are we actually having a funeral, then?” Phil shook his head. The idea had been broached a few times, but with no body, and no actual confirmation of death, they didn’t want to do it.

“He’s alive. He’s alive and he’s going to be here tomorrow.” They both just stared at him.

“What are you talking about?”

“He just called me.”

“You didn’t let us talk to him?”

“I was a bit in shock, Wil. Imagine getting a call from a dead child from a random number. I didn’t even believe it was him at first.”

“Are we sure it actually *was* him?” Techno mused, picking at the pillow next to him. “Could have been some sort of prank.”

“Nobody else knows we thought he was dead, and the people who know he’s gone wouldn’t have done that.”

“Unless it was one of his friends from wherever he was staying. Who knows what he told them about us, they could hate us enough to do that.”

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow afternoon.”

“That soon?”

“He said he was half a day away.”

By 2 pm, Phil wondered if it *had* been a cruel joke. But still, he cleaned up the house, dusted Tommy’s old room, and kept an eye on the driveway.

At 4 pm, Wilbur had started pacing, glaring between the front door and his father in tandem.

At 4:30 pm, a familiar blue van pulled into the driveway. Wil screamed for Techno, who was hiding in his room, and the three of them made it out the front door before Tommy had even turned the engine off. They stared at him from the front porch. He seemed to take a deep breath before he stepped out, closing the door softly and turning to face them with an awkward wave. He looked different, his hair lighter, likely from the sun, and pulled back into some semblance of a bun. His scars were slightly lighter, some of the lesser ones more white than anything else. He looked taller, a little bit more muscled, certainly healthier than he looked when he’d lived with them. As he approached, they noticed his limp was much less significant, and he no longer walked with his shoulders curled in, but instead with them back, as if his confidence had quadrupled. But the smile on his face, sheepish and teasing was certainly him, his eyes bright blue and excited.

“Sorry I’m late, I ended up sleeping way later than I expected to, honestly.” He laughed, glancing over the three of them carefully before a confused look crossed over his face. “Why are you looking at me like I’m dead?”

Wilbur lunged.

Tommy noticed as he approached the way his family looked sad. But when he started talking, it morphed into something worse, like grief and disbelief. “Why are you looking at me like I’m dead?”

Wilbur dove at him the second he was in range. Tommy, used to people diving at him at this point, between kids or his friends who were all very tactile, so he just caught him with a bemused noise. Wilbur was smacking his chest, tears that were some combination of sadness, joy, and anger pouring down his cheeks. Each word was punctuated with a light hit to his back or arm.

“I hate you, I hate you so much you bastard, You’re an asshole, I’m never going to forgive you, fuck you so much,” Techno stepped forward to pull Wilbur away, but Tommy shook his head at him and let Wil berate him for a few more minutes before it died off into choked sobs and bruising hugs.

“I missed you too, Wil,” Tommy whispered to him.

“I’m so mad at you, I can’t even breathe.”

“You’re making an awful lot of noise for not being able to breathe, Wilbur.” Tommy hugged him tightly for a second then pulled back. “You stink, by the way. When did you start smoking menthols?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fair enough. Let’s let the others have their turns kicking my ass, okay?”

“No,” He whined petulantly before pulling back. Techno gave them a once-over before stepping forward.

“I am furious with you.” He said with an oh-so-familiar monotone voice.

“Can you be furious with me after you give me a hug?”

“Yeah.” Techno pulled him into a hug, so reminiscent of their first in its crushing grip that Tommy almost laughed. “I like the hair.”

“Thanks, I grew it myself,” Tommy deadpanned. Techno pulled away, looking over him at arm's length.

“You look different.”

“That’s how aging works, yeah.”

“You have to teach Connor how to build a pillow fort before he kills me.”

“I will.”

“My turn?” Phil asked from the porch.

“No, I think I’m okay.” Tommy teased, and Phil looked thoroughly unamused.

“Come here, you little shit.”

“I’m like six inches taller than you, old man.” Tommy patted Techno’s shoulder before moving up the steps toward Phil. “Hi, Dad.” Phil pulled him into a hug.

“It’s so good to see you, Tommy.”

“It’s good to see you too,” Tommy mumbled. “I’ve missed you.”

“You never called.”

“No, I didn’t. I’m sorry, I should have, I just...” Tommy struggled to find the words. How did he explain that he was afraid to reach out? Afraid that rejection might just break him when he was finally feeling whole?

“It’s okay. We have plenty of time to talk about it.”

“We do,” Tommy agreed. “I have gifts for you all, by the way.”

“They can wait.”

“Of course they can.”

“So, where have you been?” Wilbur asked from his place on the couch. Tommy was sat on the coffee table, as he often did when he lived at home.

“Everywhere, really. I stayed in a few random towns for a while, headed out west, and stayed on the coast with some friends. Spent most of it just exploring, I guess.”

“Is that where you started drinking again?” Tommy scoffed.

“I don’t drink.” Wilbur looked unamused. “I don’t! The last time I drank was at that party with Dream and them. I haven’t touched a drop since.”

“We have pictures that say otherwise.” Wilbur pulled out his phone and showed Tommy the Twitter posts. Tommy snorted.

“That’s coke, Wil.” Wilbur scrunched up his nose and looked at the picture again, his eyes widening when he realized it *was* .

“So you weren’t drinking?”

“No, of course not.”

“On the subject of those posts, though, do you care to explain why random people posted memorials for you?” Techno asked carefully.

“What are you talking about? Those are pictures from my farewell party, from when I left the coast.”

“They... so they aren’t because they thought you were dead?”

“What? Of course not! They were just being dramatic because I was leaving.” Then the words caught up with him. “Did... did you think I was dead?” Wilbur looked away. “Oh my God. Oh, holy shit, I am *so sorry* , is that why you didn’t believe it was me on the phone?”

Tommy looked to Phil, who looked a little sick. “Jesus Christ. I- I am so sorry, It didn’t even *occur to me-*”

“Well, you aren’t dead, so-” Techno started

“Does that matter?”

“Course it does.”

“I am so sorry, I made a *joke* about that earlier, God I can’t believe myself, I really didn’t know, I promise, I’d have never made that kind of joke if I realized-”

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Phil muttered. “You’re here now, that’s what’s important.”

“I- yeah, I guess so. Can I get your gifts for you, or is me leaving your direct sight still a no-go?”

Techno snorted. “Here, I’ll help you carry them in.”

“Deal!” Tommy chirped, jumping up. He swayed for a millisecond, a little dazed, which shot panicked looks across his family’s faces. “No, I’m good. Stood up too fast.” He gestured toward the door, and Techno followed him outside. “So, Tech-no-blade,” Tommy started, looking him over. “What’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?” Techno replied defensively.

“Oh- I just meant what had you been up to, but based on *that* reaction I’m guessing there’s something you don’t want me to know.”

“Gifts?” Tommy sighed and nodded, Pulling out the box full of photos and jars and random trinkets.

“Sure, okay, we’ll drop it then,” Tommy agreed, *far too easily* , jumping down from the van with a small grin. “You need to dye your hair soon, it’s awfully light.” Techno shifted uncomfortably at how quickly Tommy jumped topics.

“You’re really not going to make me tell you?”

“Do you want me to?” Tommy asked with a small smile. “I can, if you want, I just figured it’d be better to let you tell me if you actually want to, not just because I demanded it.”

“This is weird. You’re being weird.” Tommy shrugged.

“I mean, we’ve both changed since I’ve been gone. I’m trying to not go all psychoanalysis on you all. I know it wigs some people out.”

“Never bothered you before.” Tommy stopped on the porch with a sigh.

“I didn’t consider how it would make you feel, before. And right now, I know you’re all still upset with me, and I don’t want to push any boundaries. I want us to stay on good terms, or to get back to them. You’re all important to me, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“You aren’t going to lose us, we’ve fought before and you never lost us then, did you?” Tommy gave him a dry look.

“Situations are a bit different now, aren’t they? Nobody wants to hurt the traumatized kid who lives in their house. Very few have such qualms about telling their adult brother who abandoned them off.”

“You didn’t abandon us,” Techno started, but Tommy snorted.

“No, I just left in the middle of the night, ignored you, and let you think I was dead for a year. I’d say that’s worse.”

“Why’d you come back?” Tommy shifted uncomfortably.

“Let’s save that conversation for now, yeah?”

“Sure, I guess.”

Tommy sat the box down on the coffee table with a grin, any sign of the conversation he and Techno had gone.

“Gifts! I have a few sort of general ones, but first, Tech-” Tommy handed over a few jars, a set of cards with recipes on them, and two bottles of wine.

“I thought you weren’t drinking?”

“They’re closed, aren’t they? They’re homemade, I got them from a little farm town that grows their own. Strawberry and Blackberry. They’re apparently good for cooking desserts with.” Techno hummed, looking at them with a small smile.

“Thank you,” He replied, setting them down. Tommy smiled then handed another bottle to Wilbur, as well as a small white guitar pick and a sheet of paper.

“So, the wine is a Peach Cherry blend, it should be pretty good. According to the woman who gave it to me, it’s one of their best sellers. The guitar pick is hand-carved bone, actually. I dunno how good it’ll be for playing but it was really cool. The-”

“Is this a flyer for an indie concert?”

“Well, if you’d let me finish, I was going to explain,” Tommy teased. “If you want to play, I can get you a spot. I stayed with the family who runs it for a few weeks when I was in town and told them about you, they said they’d give you a stage if you wanted it. It’s during their early-fall harvest fest, it’s like a 14-hour drive, but the town is really nice, I think you’d like it, honestly.”

“It’s soon,” Wilbur mumbled.

“A little over a month away, yeah. But you have a week or so to decide, I told them I’d let them know by the end of this month.”

“I’ll let you know,” Wil mumbled. “Thank you.” Tommy nodded.

“And last but not least, for Phil-” Tommy handed over a stack of polaroid photos, two books, and a bucket hat with embroidered feathers on it. “Some pictures from my trips, two books on coding written by the weirdest man I’ve ever met in my life, you’ll love them, trust me, and a new ugly hat!” Phil snorted, setting the hat on his head.

“Will this one end up in the fridge too?”

“Absolutely,” Techno, Wil, and Tommy replied in unison, laughing.

“And for general gifts, these aren’t really from me so much as just from some people I’ve met-” Tommy pulled out three blankets, each hand made and in rich earth tones, a painting, a few knickknacks, and a stack of postcards. “Free for all on these, honestly. The blankets are awesome, though.” Techno snatched one that was oranges and dark reds, Wilbur took the one with navy blues and yellows, and Phil took the green and beige one. Tommy giggled. “I knew you’d pick those. Soft, right?”

“Oh, I’m never letting this go,” Techno said completely seriously.

“I helped make them! Kind of. Mostly I held the wool. They’re alpaca!”

“These are lovely, Tommy, but you didn’t have to-”

“Speak for yourself, Dad. He absolutely had to bring me gifts,” Wilbur teased from where he was wrapped in his blanket. Tommy rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah. God, I’m *starving*. Do you guys want to go get dinner?”

They ended up in a small pizza shop right in town. Tommy was sitting next to Phil, chatting amicably about the people he’d met over the last year when a screech from the doorway cut him off. He glanced up to see Tubbo and Ranboo staring at him. “Ohno,” He muttered, “I’m so dead,”

“You’re so dead!” Tubbo hollered, earning himself a displeased look from the person at the front counter.

“H-hey, Tubzo, my friend, who would definitely not murder me in front of a whole pizza shop,” Tommy tried, looking to Ranboo for help. Ranboo did not look like he wanted to be helpful. Tubbo marched forward, grabbed the front of Tommy’s shirt, pulled him down so he could look him in the eye, and whacked him upside the head. “Okay, I deserved that.” Tubbo then hugged him, just briefly, before pulling back to glare at him again.

“You have thirty seconds to explain before I steal your kneecaps.”

“Uh, I left, and I’m back now?” Tommy tried, glancing to his family for help. They were also not looking like they wanted to help. “Also I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry doesn’t help! You were gone *forever*!”

“Just a year,” Tommy tried.

“15 months, actually,” Ranboo supplied.

“Helpful, bud. Plus! You were at school for most of that, weren’t you? It’s not like we would have seen each other anyway!”

“We could have still *texted!*” Tubbo whined.

“Ah- yeah, I guess that’s true...” Tommy muttered. “I am sorry, Tubbo. Really.”

“How long are you back for?” Ranboo asked, and Tommy froze, glaring at him when four other pairs of eyes turned to him.

“Uh, I’m not sure.” Ranboo nodded, as if that made sense.

“You aren’t staying?” Wil hissed out. Tommy sighed.

“No, I’m not staying. But! I promise I’ll let you know before I leave *and* I will actually stay in touch-” Tommy started, but trailed off at the sad looks he was getting. “Guys, c’mon, you have to understand-”

“Yeah, we get it. Too good to stay here, right? Big plans, can’t be *held down*, right?” Wilbur spat out.

“It’s not like that-”

“Boys. Let’s not have this fight here.” Tommy deflated. Phil sounded upset too, and Techno was glaring at his plate.

“We’ll hang out soon, okay?” Tommy asked Tubbo, who nodded sadly.

—

The atmosphere was tense when they got back home.

“You’re really not staying.”

“Wil, I left for a reason, I can’t just—“

“What was the reason, then? What was the reason you fucking abandoned us?”

“I wasn’t happy! I wasn’t happy here. I love you, I *do*, but this? Staying here? I can’t do that! You know that! I’ve said it a million times, and I’m not the only one who feels like that! How many times have you talked about leaving to travel for your music, how many times has Techno talked about traveling for his books? How many times has Dad said he wants to see the world? Why is it so wrong for me to actually do that?”

“Why can’t you just be happy here? With what you have?” Tommy’s shoulders sagged.

“I don’t *know*. I wish I could, I wish I could find some contentment in being stuck here, but all I can think of is how much it hurts. About everything that’s happened and everything that might happen, and it kills me. It eats away at me, but being here, it’s like I’m drowning while everyone else insists the water isn’t deep. I feel so *small* here, like I’m being crushed by every mistake I’ve ever made. Everyone looks at me with this weird sympathy because everyone knows everything about me. I hate it! I hate feeling like I can never grow past who I was! Out there, I can be someone new, I can just be me, and not worry about how it makes me look. People can wonder, but they don’t know my life story from back to front like it’s their favorite TV show, so I can let them wonder. I just want the chance to be more.” Wilbur’s anger had faded into something like horror.

“That’s really how it feels for you?”

“Yes. I just... maybe one day I can stay, but I’m not there yet. I have so many things I want to do first. I want to grow, I want to change before I become stagnant. I thought I missed home, I thought coming back here would help, but that’s not what happened. I’ve been here for 12 hours and I feel like I’m suffocating. I missed you, I missed Dad, I missed Techno, I missed my friends, but I don’t miss this. I can’t stay here.”

“Is- do we make you feel like that too?” Techno asked quietly. Tommy had almost forgotten there were other people in the room.

“Not- not the same way. But, but I feel like being here, being with you all again, makes it worse. The urge to stay and fix isn’t something that I can just ignore when I’m with you. But I have nothing left to give, I keep giving away parts of myself and I’m afraid if I stay there’ll be nothing left of me. I don’t want to lose myself.”

“We don’t want you to feel trapped, Tommy,” Phil agreed. “Nobody is going to make you stay if you don’t want to.”

“Thank you,” Tommy breathed. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’ll figure it out, alright?”

Tommy spent time with his friends. He teased Fundy and pretended to hate Schlatt and answered questions about nothing with Tubbo and Ranboo, he wandered around town with Dream and he sat and joked with Emma and Deo, then he packed his van up with Wilbur and set off to the Apple Fest. Wilbur played his songs to strangers who treated him like family, they drank coffee and ate apple crisp in a little diner booth with a sweet waitress who smiled at them. Tommy drove Wil home and told his family about his travels again, not just the good, but the parts that hurt, the loneliness, and long days and times when he thought it would be easier to give up.

He left again, he spent the Winter on the West coast, drinking soda from glass bottles and telling stories. He spent the spring meeting new people and healing. He spent the summer eating fresh strawberries and peaches and learning how to work on his van. He spent the summer with his family, and he left in the fall to help pick fresh apples and make cider.

He visited Clementine, told her of the adventure he'd finally found.

When Wil left home, following his music further and further, they stayed in touch.

When Techno published his first book, moving west, they got together and celebrated with coffee and tea.

When Phil sold the house and got one outside of town, they helped him paint the walls together, and they spoke of the people they'd met along the way.

Family meetings in the living room became group video chats from across the world. But the distance stopped hurting, stopped feeling like running away, and instead felt like growing up.

And when they came together, with bonfires and cooking and movie nights, it felt like home, and not the kind that kept you tethered down, the kind that let you rest your wings before another long flight.

It felt like growth.

It felt like healing.

It felt like freedom.

End Notes

Find me and scream at me on Twitter! @FrownChelsea

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